



# Loving and Reading in Sidney

by Gavin Alexander

*In The Defence of Poesy Sidney aligns learning from the exemplary images of fiction with falling in love. What may appear to be a lazy commonplace is more than that. Sidney's Neoplatonic understanding of love is bound up with his Neoplatonic theory of reading. In both models the object is the idea that lies behind appearances. A reader must apprehend the "idea or fore-conceit" of the poet in order not only to admire his fictional characters but to understand "why and how" the poet made them, and thus to move from this gnosis to imitative praxis. Similarly, a lover climbs the Platonic ladder of love, from the beauty of the beloved to an idea of beauty and ultimately to the divine maker of that idea. In the Platonic tradition loving, writing, and reading are never far apart, because they share so much common ground. With this background in mind, Sidney's representation of love in *Astrophil and Stella* and the *Arcadia* as a sort of readerly activity begins to look less casual. This article examines the sources and uses of Sidney's imagery of loving reading and writing—which in the *Arcadia* cluster around Sidney's representations of Argalus and Parthenia, and of Pyrocles and Philoclea. It suggests that Sidney is not only using his models of idealizing reading to add color and depth to his depiction of love but is—if we turn things round—thinking in a more subtly worked-out manner than in the *Defence* about the mechanisms through which his readers will read, be delighted, learn, be moved, and ultimately find themselves transformed.*

THIS article is about both loving and reading in Sidney and about the things they have in common. My primary interest is in how we read, both according to Sidney's theory in *The Defence of Poesy* and in practice when confronted by Sidney's own works. But what have the theory and practice of reading got to do with love? The answer is, not only is the challenge of reading "aright" (Sidney's word) a difficult one when the subject matter is love, as Sidney freely confesses, but also loving and reading stand frequently as metaphors for each other in Sidney's writings. In examining this connection and its background

I shall be assuming that it is in metaphors that a poet like Sidney does some of his best thinking (as Aristotle says, an ability to use metaphor “is a sign of natural genius, as to be good at metaphor is to perceive resemblances”).<sup>1</sup> And I shall be assuming that our approach to those metaphors should not be a matter simply of translating them back into literal terms but should rather be one of exploring and perhaps amplifying or extending them. That is to say, I will not be doing the job of an intellectual historian on Sidney, elucidating a theory he may never have explicitly formulated. When critics apply too much logic to the *Defence* it tends to fall apart or at least to feel the strain.<sup>2</sup> So I think it is worth taking his ideas about literature back into his own literary writings, to see how they look there and perhaps to add something to them from the associations that they develop in that setting.

I begin this essay by examining Sidney’s theory of reading as presented in *The Defence of Poesy*. I notice in the *Defence* an ambivalent evocation of the Platonic theory of love and ask how committed Sidney was to this theory before suggesting that the questions of how reading works and of the usefulness of Plato’s theory of love are for Sidney parallel or mutually answering questions. I trace Sidney’s development of analogies between loving, reading, and artistic creation to his direct engagement with Plato, surveying the evidence for this (as well as the mediating role of Plotinus, Augustine, Mornay, and others) and paying particular attention to the role of the “*idea* or fore-conceit” in Sidney’s poetics. These analogies enable us to fill a gap in Sidney’s literary theory, for he otherwise leaves unaddressed how the poet’s *idea*

<sup>1</sup> *Poetics*, 1459a, in the translation of M. E. Hubbard, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 122.

<sup>2</sup> A tradition that began when, sometime between 1584 and 1586, Sidney himself asked William Temple to give him a detailed logician’s reading of the *Defence* (see William Temple’s “Analysis” of Sir Philip Sidney’s “Apology for Poetry,” ed. and trans. John Webster [Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1984]). For a representative modern example, see A. Leigh Deneef, “Rereading Sidney’s *Apology*,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 155–91; the results are impressive in their terms, but in clarifying Sidney’s theory in theoretical terms, much ambiguity is lost. There have been several book-length studies of Sidney’s literary theory, each emphasising particular areas of its background to great revisionist effect, but each—to varying extents—producing a consequently partial account. These include Forrest G. Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known: Sidney’s “Apology” in its Philosophical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Åke Bergvall, *The “Enabling of Judgement”: Sir Philip Sidney and the Education of the Reader*, *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 70 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1989); Michael Mack, *Sidney’s Poetics: Imitating Creation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005); and Robert E. Stillman, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

is to be apprehended and imitated by the reader. I next examine the relations of loving and reading in Sidney's poetry and fiction, first in *Astrophil and Stella* and then in the *Arcadia*. Sidney, I argue, is interested in developing the fundamentally asymmetric model of love in Plato (older lover who perceives the Platonic idea, younger beloved who is offered only reflections) in the direction of something more symmetrical and mutual. He does this by activating the third element in that triangle of analogy—lovers as readers as artists. The figure of Pygmalion, the idealizing artist who became a loving viewer, does important work here; Pygmalion was also used by Sidney's student William Scott to elaborate his own Sidneian theory of loving artistic *mimesis*, and he presides over a key moment in Sidney's narrative of the mutually idealizing love of Philoclea and Pyrocles in the *Arcadia*. Finally, I discuss an extended episode describing Philoclea's growing, emulative, love for Pyrocles/Zelma, an episode densely interwoven with the lexicon of Sidney's literary theory that offers, in effect, a detailed narrative illustration of a loving hermeneutics. I draw from it a Sidneian model of reading as a loving and mutually transformative process, whereby text and reader both idealize and reshape one another. Sidney's poetic play with Platonic love, I conclude, leads him to what we can call a Platonic hermeneutics: a Sidneian model of interpretation with a distinctly Platonic shape.

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Sidney's theory of reading in *The Defence of Poesy* appears to be overly simplistic at first glance. It concerns writing that deals in ideally good or bad characters rather than the more mixed characters of, for example, Aristotelian tragedy. With its metaphors of schoolboys and sweetened pills, it often appears to envisage interpretation as a passive affair, the poet tricking his readers into learning an edifying lesson when they think they are just enjoying a good story. When Sidney comes to the question of love, in the section of the *Defence* in which he refutes the various arguments against poetry, he sacrifices most literary practice in order to hold on to this theory:

They say the comedies rather teach than reprehend amorous conceits. They say the lyric is larded with passionate sonnets, the elegiac weeps the want of his mistress, and that even to the heroical Cupid hath ambitiously climbed. Alas, Love, I would thou couldst as well defend thyself as thou canst offend others; I would those on whom thou dost attend could either put thee away or yield good reason why they keep thee. But grant love of beauty to be a beastly fault

(although it be very hard, since only man and no beast hath that gift to discern beauty); grant that lovely name of love to deserve all hateful reproaches (although even some of my masters the philosophers spent a good deal of their lamp oil in setting forth the excellency of it); grant, I say, whatsoever they will have granted, that not only love but lust, but vanity, but—if they list—scurrility possesseth many leaves of the poets' books: yet think I, when this is granted, they will find their sentence may with good manners put the last words foremost, and not say that poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Sidney might have done something else here. His parentheses show that he is thinking about Platonic love, and yet he does not attempt to rescue the literature of love by arguing that it might represent, directly or even allegorically, an ascent up a Platonic ladder of love to a divine idea of beauty. That some critics have made this argument about Sidney's own works, and especially *Astrophil and Stella*,<sup>4</sup> is a development Sidney perhaps tried to forestall:

You that with allegorie's curious frame,  
Of other's children changelings use to make,  
With me those paines for God's sake do not take:  
I list not dig so deepe for brasen fame.  
When I say "*Stella*", I do meane the same  
Princess of Beautie, for whose only sake  
The raines of *Love* I love, though never slake[.]<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sidney's "*The Defence of Poesy*" and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), 35; all further references are to this edition ("DP") and are given parenthetically in the text. Since one purpose of this essay is to notice Sidney's neglected contact with Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, it is worth noting that the passage quoted ends with an Augustinian maneuver: see *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), book 2, 36.54.132: "There are also certain rules of the more flamboyant discipline now called eloquence, which are valid in spite of the fact that they can be used to commend falsehood. Since they can also be used to commend the truth, it is not the subject itself that is reprehensible, but the perversity of those who abuse it." All further references are to the text and translation of this edition ("DDC") and give consecutively the book number and the passage reference according to all three current systems of numbering.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the readings of the sequence in Tom W. N. Parker, *Proportional Form in the Sonnets of the Sidney Circle: Loving in Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Thomas P. Roche, Jr., *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* (New York: AMS Press, 1989); and Frances A. Yates, "The Emblematic Conceit in Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* and in the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 6 (1943): 101–21.

<sup>5</sup> *Astrophil and Stella* 28, ll. 1–7; text of this and all further quotations from *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), using Ringler's sigla (in this case AS 28.1–7).

But Sidney is hedging his bets, the enjambment after "I do meane the same" at the end of the fifth line allowing us for a moment to think that Astrophil is saying, "When I say Stella I mean Stella" before "Princess of Beautie" sets us thinking in a more Platonic direction again.

How committed is Sidney to the Platonic theory of love? He plays games with it, as Richard McCabe and others have shown, most notably in *Astrophil and Stella*.<sup>6</sup> But I am not sure this need mean that he cannot on occasion take it very seriously indeed. Another question that passage from the *Defence* leads us to ask is whether Sidney can envisage anything being learned from a story about love, and if so, how? Once again, we can notice a road Sidney does not take. One of his key sources is Plutarch's essay on how the young should be taught to read poetry,<sup>7</sup> in which Plutarch describes the job of teaching young readers to distinguish between the skill of the poet's imitation and the moral value of what is represented.<sup>8</sup> Homer's Achilles is perfectly drawn, but he is not a perfect man. Just as, in life, people display good and bad characteristics, so in fiction we are dealing not with entirely good and entirely bad characters but with mixed characters. An ability to come to a correct view of their virtues and vices, Sidney might have argued—and Spenser surely believes—is the sort of necessary life skill that can be developed by the reading of poetry.

I wish to suggest that these two questions—of Sidney's commitment to the theory of Platonic love and of how readers learn—not only are intimately connected but to an extent answer each other. And this is because of an analogy he exploits in many places, between the relation

<sup>6</sup> McCabe, "Conflicts of Platonic Love and Sensual Desire in *Astrophil and Stella*," in *Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England*, ed. John Scattergood (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1984), 103–26. John Roe nicely argues that Sidney moves from engagement (mostly by way of parody) with Ficinian Neoplatonism to a direct response to Plato's myth of the cave in the later stages of the sequence: see "Italian Neoplatonism and the Poetry of Sidney, Shakespeare, Chapman, and Donne," in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 103–7. For S. K. Heninger, Jr., "Astrophil's loss of Stella may be seen metonymically as Sidney's farewell to platonist idealism" (*Sidney and Spenser: The Poet as Maker* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989], 485).

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 14d–37b, the essay known as "Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat" or "De audiendis poetis." All references to and quotations from classical sources use the volumes in the Loeb Classical Library series unless otherwise stated. On Sidney's use of this source, see Margaret W. Ferguson, "Sidney's *A Defence of Poetry*: A Retrial," *Boundary 2: A Journal of Postmodern Literature* 7 (1979): 61–95; and Bergvall, *The "Enabling of Judgement"*, 102–4.

<sup>8</sup> See especially 17f–18f and 25e–28d. For this distinction, common enough in ancient literary criticism and poetry, cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1460b13–15.

of poet or text to reader and that of lover to beloved. This connection looks more highly charged when we notice that the literary-theoretical language of the *Defence of Poesy* is not confined to that work but is to be found in Sidney's other writings too and especially in the *Arcadia*. Sidney cannot help using metaphors. We find one even in his central definition of poetry:

Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimēsis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end: to teach and delight. (*DP*, 10)

This easy recourse to metaphors helps us to make connections between different areas of his thought and between his different works. We can witness a kind of slippage even within the *Defence*, when Sidney describes the role of the reader in terms that echo the job of the writer:

and therefore, as in history, looking for truth, they may go away full fraught with falsehood, so in poesy, looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention. (*DP*, 34–35)

This passage is not always well glossed in editions of the *Defence*.<sup>9</sup> The problem is that Sidney is describing what readers do with fictions but is using the images and concepts—"ground-plot," "invention"—with which he likes to describe what poets do when they create those fictions. The poet finds material and designs his plot (the rhetorical stages of *inventio* and *dispositio*); his readers, delighted, taught, and moved by the poet's work, find in it material on which to base a redesign of their lives and selves: "an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention."<sup>10</sup> (I shall return later to this notion of readerly praxis—the actions that follow interpretation—as a kind of writing.)

In a related passage in the "old" *Arcadia*, Sidney describes Pyrocles plotting how to elope with Philoclea by setting up her parents on a blind date with one another. Pyrocles is disguised as Cleophila the Amazon,

<sup>9</sup> See for example *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 202, which reads the passage as describing the mental places consulted and the inventions retrieved from them, by a readerly art of memory.

<sup>10</sup> A possible source or analogue for Sidney's use of an artistic metaphor to describe an act of ethical self-improvement is Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.9, where self-perfection on the analogy of the sculptor hewing and polishing is a precondition of seeing the ideas and ultimately God. For Sidney and Plotinus, see Kurt Spellmeyer, "Plotinus and Seventeenth-Century Literature: A Prolegomenon to Further Study," *Pacific Coast Philology* 17 (1982): 50–58 (esp. 50–52). For a possible site of Sidney's encounter with Plotinus, his translation of Mornay's *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrestienne*, see below, nn. 23 and 27.

and so he is referred to by the narrator with feminine pronouns. The strategy of disguise, the narrator has previously told us, was “put in his head” by “love, the refiner of invention,”<sup>11</sup> and here again Pyrocles is represented as a loving poet or artist:

With that with hasty hands she gat herself up, turning her sight to everything, as if change of object might help her invention. So went she again to the cave, where forthwith it came into her head that should be the fittest place to perform her exploit—of which she had now a kind of confused conceit, although she had not set down in her fancy the meeting with each particularity that might fall out. But as a painter doth at the first but show a rude proportion of the thing he imitates, which after with more curious hand he draws to the representing each lineament, so had her thoughts (beating about it continually) received into them a ground plot of her device, although she had not in each part shaped it according to a full determination. (OA, 215)<sup>12</sup>

We can start to turn these metaphors around and ask whether this passage might have something to tell us about the process of artistic creation, whether Cleophila’s “kind of confused conceit” could furnish an explanatory gloss for the celebrated “*idea* or fore-conceit” created by the poet in the *Defence* (DP, 9).

Readers, then, can be like artists, we learn from the *Defence*: they may “use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention.” Lovers, too, can be like artists, that passage in the *Arcadia* shows us: their faculty of “invention” refined by love, they will devise a “conceit” or “ground plot” rather as a painter sketches an initial “proportion.” And we can complete this triangle of metaphoric associations by noticing that readers can also be like lovers, according to a commonplace that Sidney borrows from Plato and Cicero and refers to several times. If we could see virtue, that commonplace tells us, we would fall in love with it, so beautiful would it be;<sup>13</sup> and it is the making of virtue into

<sup>11</sup> *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)*, ed. Jean Robertson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 12; all further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text prefixed with “OA.” Cf. the revised version of this passage in *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (London, 1590), 12r; further quotations from this edition, which I quote in the Kent State University Press facsimile reproduction of 1970, are indicated with the siglum 90; I expand abbreviations and regularize i/j and u/v in quotations from this source.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the version of this passage in the composite 1593 *Arcadia: The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (London, 1593), 2H5r, ll. 8–18 (hereafter “93,” with abbreviations expanded and usage of i/j and u/v regularized in any quotations from this source).

<sup>13</sup> DP, 29; and cf. 21, 24. The source is Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d, followed in Cicero, *De finibus*, 2.16.52 and *De officiis*, 1.5.14.



something visible, an "image" or "picture" as Sidney calls it (*DP*, 12, 17, 29, etc.), that is the job of the poet ("A perfect picture I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description," 16). This is how Pyrocles learns from Musidorus ("He taught me by word, and best by example, giving me in him so lively an Image of vertue, as ignorance could not cast such mist over mine eyes, as not to see, and to love it" [90, 2A5r]).<sup>14</sup> And it is how Astrophil tries, and fails, to learn from Stella in sonnet 25 of *Astrophil and Stella*: Plato has said "That Vertue, if it once met with our eyes, / Strange flames of Love it in our soules would raise"; Virtue, "with vertuous care to ster / Love of her selfe, takes Stella's shape"; and now Astrophil proves Plato's saying true, "for I do burne in love" (*AS* 25.3–4, 9–10, and 14).<sup>15</sup>

If we accept Sidney's serious engagement with Platonism, then this chain of associations between loving, reading, and artistic creation is no surprise. We will continue to argue about the precise sources and coloring of Sidney's particular Platonism, what combination of Mornay, Castiglione, Bembo, Ficino, St. Augustine, Plotinus, or any number of other writers who had engaged with Plato and the Platonic tradition, might have inflected Sidney's own versions of Platonic theories, themes, and concepts.<sup>16</sup> But there is good evidence that he read Plato, and in a focused way; and good reason to believe, therefore, that his Platonism comes above all from Plato. He refers in the *Defence*, not always by name, but directly enough, to the *Symposium*, Plato's dialogue on love; to the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue on love and rhetoric that includes a key account of Plato's theory of the forms; to the *Republic*, where the theory of forms is

<sup>14</sup> The text corresponds to *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The New Arcadia)*, ed. Victor Skretkowitz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 235; further references to this (modern-spelling) edition use the siglum NA.

<sup>15</sup> See Bergvall, *The "Enabling of Judgement,"* for an excellent reading of this sonnet, teasing out the different Platonisms with which it plays (97–99).

<sup>16</sup> The working assumption in accounts of Sidney's Platonism is that it derives from modern sources. On the tendency in accounts of Platonism in England to lump together the many different kinds of continental and classical Platonism, see Sears Jayne, "Ficino and the Platonism of the English Renaissance," *Comparative Literature* 4 (1952): 214. Jayne argues that Sidney was one of the few Elizabethan writers to go back to Italian sources rather than just copying the diluted Petrarchan Platonism of the French sonneteers (233–36). See also Bergvall, *The "Enabling of Judgement,"* esp. chap. 2, for Sidney's kind of Platonism as a marked rejection of Florentine Platonism and far closer to Augustine. Bergvall also rightly draws attention to another strangely neglected source or analogue: the Augustinian Platonism informing the detailed analysis of texts and ideas in Mornay's *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrestienne*, which Sidney translated (51–52).

further worked out and used to denigrate artistic mimesis; to the *Ion*, Plato's somewhat tongue-in-cheek dialogue about inspired rhapsodes, often used by the Neoplatonists to articulate a theory of artistic creation through divine inspiration; and to the *Timaeus*, with its creation myth in which the Demiurge patterns reality on the eternal Platonic forms.<sup>17</sup> We know that Sidney was sent, in 1579, a copy of the new three-volume edition of the complete works of Plato edited and printed in Geneva by his friend Henri Estienne; this was a parallel-text edition, with the Greek text in one column and a Latin translation by Jean de Serres in the other.<sup>18</sup> So a reading of Plato might have occupied him at the time

<sup>17</sup> *Symposium*: DP, 5, 39; *Phaedrus*: DP, 5, 29, 39; *Republic*: DP, 5, 39; *Ion*: DP, 40; and *Timaeus*: DP, 5. Other dialogues are the sources for remarks and terms: *Sophist* for *eikastikē* and *phantastikē* (DP, 36); *Theaetetus* for the astronomer and the ditch (DP, 13); and *Phaedo* (perhaps via Plutarch) for Socrates versifying Aesop (DP, 41). Earlier studies of Sidney's use of Plato include: Irene Samuel, "The Influence of Plato on Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 1 (1940): 383–91; F. Michael Krouse, "Plato and Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*," *Comparative Literature* 6 (1954): 138–47; John P. McIntyre, "Sidney's 'Golden World,'" *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962): 356–65; and Morris Henry Partee, "Sir Philip Sidney and the Renaissance Knowledge of Plato," *English Studies* 51 (1970): 411–24. Much earlier debate had Sidney as either Platonic or Aristotelian, and that pattern continues in Heninger's *Sidney and Spenser: The Poet as Maker*, where Sidney's modern poetics is Aristotelian rather than Platonic (and Spenser is the benighted Neoplatonist), though he leaves space for Sidney's syncretism (in one telling phrase talking of "the neo-Aristotelian poetics that Sidney meddles with platonist principles in the *Defence*" [383]). The most eloquent reconciliation remains that of John C. Ulreich, Jr., for whom the *Defence* is "a dynamic fusion of Aristotelian and Platonic impulses, not a mere amalgam of influences but a coherent argument" ("'The Poets Only Deliver': Sidney's Conception of *Mimesis*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 15 (1982): 67–84; reprinted in *Essential Articles for the Study of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney [Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986], 142). In this tradition, see also M. J. B. Allen, "Sidney's *Defence* and the Image Making of Plato's *Sophist*," in *Sir Philip Sidney's Achievements*, ed. M. J. B. Allen, Dominic Baker-Smith, and Arthur F. Kinney (New York: AMS Press, 1990), 93–108; and D. H. Craig, "A Hybrid Growth: Sidney's Theory of Poetry in *An Apology for Poetry*," *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980): 183–201. Bergvall's study is one of the most impressively generous accounts of the issues: "The synthesis of Plato and Aristotle was something [Sidney] shared with humanism in general and need not imply the rejection of one for the other" (*The "Enabling of Judgement"*, 59); "Sidney devised a poetics which was based on a mixture of Augustinian Platonism and Aristotelianism, and which had a strong rhetorical bias. The Sidneian model posited a world of ideas beyond the written text and a communicative model by which these ideas could be transmitted to the reader" (122). But a literalism of sorts sets in when Bergvall imagines a Sidneian reading of Sidney, which is entirely circumscribed by (devoutly Protestant) Christian ethics.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Opera quae extant omnia*, 3 vols. (Geneva, 1578). On Sidney's use of this edition, see S. K. Heninger, Jr., "Sidney and Serranus' Plato," *English Literary Renaissance* 13 (1983): 146–61. For the question of Sidney's use of the Greek text, see Micha Lazarus, "Sidney's Greek Poetics," *Studies in Philology* 112 (2015): 504–36. Heninger usefully draws attention to the role of the paratextual features of Serranus's Latin translation in shaping Sidney's understanding of the dialogues.

that he was formulating the *Arcadia*, and must have taken place before he wrote the *Defence*, *Astrophil and Stella*, and the revised *Arcadia* in the early 1580s. This interest in Plato bears its most obvious fruit in what Sidney says about poetic creation in the "golden world" passage in the *Defence*:

There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. [. . .] Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demigods, cyclopes, chimeras, furies and such like. So as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done, neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely: her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

But let those things alone and go to man, for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost cunning is employed, and know whether she have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes, so constant a friend as Pylades, so valiant a man as Orlando, so right a prince as Xenophon's Cyrus, so excellent a man every way as Virgil's Aeneas. Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essential, the other in imitation or fiction, for any understanding knoweth the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them; which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air, but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him. (*DP*, 8–9)

For Plato, the ideas are eternal, immutable forms that exist on a higher plane of reality than the visible universe, which is a mere shadow of their substance. Our souls glimpse them between incarnations, and what we learn in our life is shaped by half-memories of the forms. Our ability to remember what we had glimpsed may be enhanced by the madness of poetic inspiration, but the surest route is love, which is revealed to be not a mere physical itch but a recognition of a shadowy reflection of the idea or form of beauty in the beauty of the person we

love.<sup>19</sup> We may then move from this perceptible beauty to the idea of beauty, regaining that lost glimpse of the Platonic form itself and also sparing ourselves the messy business of physical love. As Castiglione formulates this:

in steade of goinge out of his witt with thought, as he must do that will consider the bodilye beawty, he may come into his witt, to behoulde the beawty that is seene with the eyes of the minde, which then beegin to be sharpe and thorough seeinge, whan the eyes of the body lose the floure of their sightlynesse.<sup>20</sup>

We can see Sidney on a similar track when he describes the Psalms as a kind of love poetry: “a heavenly poesy, wherein almost [the Psalmist] showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith” (*DP*, 7).

As Plato famously argued in the *Republic*, art offers representations of the visible world, and that visible world is itself a set of copies of the ideas; and copies of copies are of little value. Platonic theory, though, does not depend on this apparent hostility to artistic representation, and a Neoplatonic modification to the theory of the relation of art to the ideas was offered by Cicero, Seneca, and Plotinus, and taken up with renewed vigor by Renaissance theorists of visual art especially but also of poetry. According to this modification, the artist represents not something in the world that is a mere copy of an idea but the idea itself.<sup>21</sup> If we accept that the artist can apprehend the ideas and is not restricted only to copying their manifestations in the visible world, then the artist may improve on nature’s work or, as Plotinus puts it, “add where na-

<sup>19</sup> See *Phaedrus*, 244b–257b.

<sup>20</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* [trans. Thomas Hoby], ed. Virginia Cox (London: Everyman, 1994), 357.

<sup>21</sup> See Cicero, *Orator*, 2.8–10; Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.8.1; and Seneca, *Epistulae morales*, 65.7: “it is [the idea] that the artist gazed upon when he created the work which he had decided to carry out. Now it makes no difference whether he has his pattern outside himself, that he may direct his glance to it, or within himself, conceived and placed there by himself.” For analogues within the traditions of Italian art criticism, Italian and French poetry and poetics, and Protestant theology, see also *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, 3rd ed. rev. R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 140–41, and Walter R. Davis, *Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 35–37. For a useful survey of the various theses about the meaning and sources of Sidney’s “idea or fore-conceit” along with an account of the term’s genealogy, see chap. 3 of Michael Mack, *Sidney’s Poetics*, esp. 55–77. See also Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known*, 108–10; and for Augustinian analogues, see Bergvall, *The “Enabling of Judgement,”* 37–39. There is always within this tradition an ambiguity as to whether the *idea* is just a fancy word for whatever the poet or artist projects or really does map on to the Platonic form itself. On this oscillation in the Renaissance, see Mack, *Sidney’s Poetics*, 57–59.

ture is lacking":<sup>22</sup> Nature gives you Caesar; the poet gives you Aeneas, a better expression of the idea of a just and noble leader.

If we return to the central passage from the *Defence*, we can see the importance of this theory of the idea. God forms the world on the pattern of the ideas; the poet can form a second world on the pattern of those ideas.<sup>23</sup> We would then say that a character like Cyrus, to take Sidney's favorite example, is not so much a complex person as an expression of an idea of virtue. If we learn from his example, then we become another representation or reification of that idea of virtue:

the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them; which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air, but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him. (*DP*, 9)

We should pause over that last conditional clause. The skill of the poet "standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself"; and the skill of the reader consists in apprehending that idea. If the idea is properly conceived, delivered, and apprehended, the fictional idea of Cyrus will "make many Cyruses" because readers will be moved to imitate what they have learned. But only, in that important qualification, "if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him." This is a rare example of Sidney thinking about reading as an active rather than a passive process: it implies some effort to apprehend and understand the idea.<sup>24</sup> But Sidney does not elaborate on this process here or anywhere else in the *Defence*, and we are left rather tantalized. How does he think interpretation works; what is it to "learn

<sup>22</sup> *Enneads*, 5.8.1 in the translation of Stephen MacKenna: *The Enneads*, ed. John Dillon (London: Penguin, 1991), 411.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney's Platonic understanding of the process of divine creation finds contemporary sources and analogues in Du Bartas, *La sepmaine* (on which, see Mack, *Sidney's Poetics*, 77–80) and Mornay's *De la vérité* as translated by Sidney and/or Arthur Golding: "For, as the Craftsman maketh his worke by the patterne which he had erst conceyued in his mynde, which patterne is his inward word: so God made the World and all that is therein, by that sayd Speech of his as by his inward skill or arte" (*A woork concerning the trewnesse of the Christian religion . . . begunne to be translated into English by Sir Philip Sidney Knight, and at his request finished by Arthur Golding* [London, 1587], 60; hereafter "Trewnesse").

<sup>24</sup> For a similar point made about this key phrase, see Bergvall, *The "Enabling of Judgment,"* 39–41: "Sidney advocates process rather than product" (39–40).

aright"; and how can fiction really transform our behavior? How does the mechanism of the readerly apprehension and imitation of the idea function? The answer that I want to offer is that, for Sidney, it functions like love, but this is no simple answer.<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \*

Sidney might have encountered something like a theory of loving reading in Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*.<sup>26</sup> Augustine was profoundly influenced by both Plato and Plotinus, and there is a recognizably Platonic shape to his account of a progress of readerly skill up a kind of hermeneutic ladder or staircase, discovering "meanings that are won only with difficulty" to God and to wisdom.<sup>27</sup> The association between Platonic love and hermeneutic skill is one of the most important fields of metaphorical play in *Astrophil and Stella*. Astrophil struggles with the theory of Platonic love: he knows that he is supposed to move from desiring Stella to something more spiritual and intellectual, but he just cannot manage it. And it is often in metaphors of reading that Astrophil describes his failure. He is too addicted to looking at Stella and can only manage any patience when in her presence, "When I might read those

<sup>25</sup> The only argument about Sidneian poetics I have encountered that resembles mine here is Walter R. Davis's in *Idea and Act*, where he observes in a brief but telling paragraph that "Poetry is . . . like love in its being and operation. It exists, like love, as intermediary between the concretely actual and the Idea; it acts, like love, to draw men from the actual to the Idea. It is, in short, the mediator of two worlds" (41).

<sup>26</sup> *De doctrina* remains an under-exploited source in work on the *Defence*, with Bergvall the only significant exception (see also his essay on Sidney in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. Karla Pollman, 3 vols. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 3:1737–39). Heninger makes good use of *De civitate Dei* in *Sidney and Spenser* (182–96), though that is an outline of Augustinian aesthetics rather than hermeneutics. For useful background in an excellent account of John Donne's engagement with Augustinian hermeneutics, see Katrin Ettenhuber's *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 15–21. Also worth considering as a source is the straightforward analogy investigated by Plotinus between divinely wrought beauty (which might prompt love) and the beauty of the humanly wrought artwork (*Enneads*, 5.8.1–2).

<sup>27</sup> DDC, book 2, 7.9.16–17.11.23. Augustine posits seven stages (or steps: his word is *gradus*): fear of God; holiness (and attendant teachableness); knowledge; fortitude; compassion; a sixth stage, "in which he now purifies the eye [*oculum purgat*] by which God may actually be seen" and, again, "purifies the eye of his heart [*purgat oculum cordis*]" (DDC, book 2, 7.11.22–23); and finally wisdom. Sidney appears to glance at the sixth stage when he talks of "that unspeakable and everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith" (DP, 7), though cf. also *Trewnesse*, 7 and Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.9. For further Augustinian usages, see Bergvall, *The "Enabling of Judgement,"* 24–25. Cf. also *Trewnesse* on the rational "mynd sight" (55), "insight of Mynd" (85, quoting Plotinus), or "cleersighted" wit (325) that apprehends God.

letters faire of blisse, / Which in her face teach vertue" (AS 56.5–6). He fears that his "Hope" is misinterpreting her behavior:

Her eye's-speech is translated thus by thee:  
 But failst thou not in phrase so heav'nly hie?  
 Looke on againe, the faire text better trie:  
 What blushing notes doest thou in margine see?  
 (AS 67.5–8)<sup>28</sup>

Astrophil's failures as a lover are represented as his failures as a reader. For us as readers, for whom Stella is a text not only metaphorically but also actually, the effect is to align Astrophil's loving of Stella with our reading of Sidney's poem. We can interpret Sidney's characters and the larger text of *Astrophil and Stella*, and this will be an activity similar (and similarly challenging) to Astrophil's as a Platonic lover. Two poems in particular set out this analogy. The less well-known is the seventh song, one of a pair in which Astrophil writes about Stella singing and about how his sight is captivated by her physical beauty, his hearing by her beautiful voice:

Whose senses in so evill consort, their stepdame Nature laies,  
 That ravishing delight in them most sweete tunes do not raise;  
 Or if they do delight therein, yet are so cloyed with wit,  
 As with sententious lips to set a title vaine on it:  
 O let them heare these sacred tunes, and learne in wonder's schooles,  
 To be (in things past bounds of wit) fooles, if they be not fooles.

Who have so leaden eyes, as not to see sweet beautie's show,  
 Or seeing, have so wodden wits, as not that worth to know;  
 Or knowing, have so muddy minds, as not to be in love;  
 Or loving, have so frothy thoughts, as easily thence to move:  
 O let them see these heavenly beames, and in faire letters reede  
 A lesson fit, both sight and skill, love and firme love to breede.

Heare then, but then with wonder heare; see but adoring see,  
 No mortall gifts, no earthly fruites, now here descended be:  
 See, do you see this face? a face? nay image of the skies,  
 Of which the two life-giving lights are figured in her eyes:  
 Heare you this soule-invading voice, and count it but a voice?  
 The very essence of their tunes, when Angels do rejoyce.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Petrarch for a precedent: "bit by bit within her lovely eyes I read whatever I say of Love and whatever I write" (*Canzoniere*, 151.13–14, in *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976]).

As so often, Astrophil may just be talking to himself, telling himself to stop lusting after Stella and react with something more like spiritual wonder. But he does seem to be imagining other reactions (in the first stanza, those who hear a song and have to offer a sententious judgment on it); he may, in fact, be talking to us and guiding our response to Stella. The previous poem, Song vi, had begun "O you that heare this voice, / O you that see this face," requiring us either to step back and merely overhear a conversation in which we are not included or to step forward and make the leap from being told about something to imagining we can see and hear it, thereby making the poem an address to its readers. This, in fact, is the effort Sidney's poetics requires: the theory of the "speaking picture" is built on the notion that words can put an image before the mind's eye that—as far as the mind is concerned—is no less real than the reports of actualities presented to it by the senses.<sup>29</sup> But we, as imaginative readers, always know that we have taken that step, that we are going along with the poet in imagining that we can see what he tells us he sees. So when we are told in the seventh song that Stella is an image of the skies, figuring sun and moon in her eyes, we are, necessarily, deliberately, reminded that the Stella we see is already an image—a speaking picture created by words, in figures. To put that in explicitly Platonic terms, she is not a shadow of an idea—an image of heavenly perfection—but rather a verbal image of the idea that an idea might be shadowed forth. Against this tendency to lose Stella in the poetic play of Platonic shadows and mirrors, Sidney sets the driving logic of the second stanza, employing the rhetorical figure known as *climax* (the Greek word, meaning "ladder") or *gradatio* (the Latin term, meaning "staircase") to push us up the Platonic ladder of love from seeing to recognizing to loving to learning.<sup>30</sup> This movement toward the apprehension of the idea that Stella figures is likened to reading—"O let them see these heavenly beames, and in faire letters reede / A lesson fit, both sight and skill, love and firme love to breede." Looking is like read-

<sup>29</sup> For more on Sidney's visual poetics and epistemology, see Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known*; and my "Seeing through Words in Theories of Poetry: Sidney, Puttenham, Lodge," in *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, ed. Kent Cartwright (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), 350–63.

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is one of the figures Augustine dwells most on in *De doctrina*: see DDC, book 4, 7.11.32 ("Yet we recognize here the figure generally designated by the Greek word 'climax'—though some people, not wishing to speak of a 'ladder,' prefer the Latin word *gradatio*—whereby words or ideas are linked one with another"). Cf. Augustine's use of *gradus* for the steps of Christian reading, n. 27 above.



ing, then; but we are not looking, we are reading, and any sight is either merely metaphorical or at most a matter of the mind's eye activated by the verbal image. Notice how overwrought Astrophil sounds as he tries not only to tell us we can see something but to tell us that the something we cannot see but should imagine we can see is not actually what it appears to be but something else altogether: "See, do you see this face? a face? nay image of the skies."

This poem problematizes the act of reading. It draws attention to the effort the reader has to make in order to move beyond the surface of the text to some imaginative apprehension of what lies behind it. But the poem also represents successful reading and interpretation as intuitive and amorous: we should not offer sententious commentary and interpretation; rather, we should be struck dumb with wonder, leave reason behind, and be (if we are not foolish) like fools; if we are not leaden, wooden, muddy, or frothy, we should love what we see and stay there, not move easily thence, be firm in love, both see and know ("skill" means knowledge).<sup>31</sup>

Sidney's more famous take on the analogy between loving and reading is sonnet 71:

Who will in fairest booke of Nature know,  
 How Vertue may best lodg'd in beautie be,  
 Let him but learne of *Love* to reade in thee,  
*Stella*, those faire lines, which true goodnesse show.  
 There shall he find all vices' overthrow,  
 Not by rude force, but sweetest soveraigntie  
 Of reason, from whose light those night-birds flie;  
 That inward sunne in thine eyes shineth so.  
 And not content to be Perfection's heire  
 Thy selfe, doest strive all minds that way to move,  
 Who marke in thee what is in thee most faire.  
 So while thy beautie drawes the heart to love,  
 As fast thy Vertue bends that love to good:  
 "But ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

The loving reader may love the beautiful image of the idea of virtue and read a lesson of goodness in its "faire lines"; or desire may drag that reader back down to earth, as it does Astrophil. Astrophil's failure as a lover is explicitly a failure as a reader, a reader who is unable, in the terms of Sidney's *Defence*, to "learn aright why and how that maker

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the possibly Sidneian "tree of the skill of good and euill," in *Trewnesse*, 495.

Astrophil starts his sequence confidently imagining a straightforward hermeneutic ladder (and notice, as Abraham Fraunce did, the textbook use of *climax* or *gradatio* here):<sup>32</sup>

(AS 1.1-4)

in piercing phrases late,  
 Th'anatomy of all my woes I wrate,  
*Stella's* sweete breath the same to me did reed.  
 O voice, ô face, maugre my speech's might,  
 Which wooed wo, most ravishing delight  
 Even those sad words even in sad me did breed.

(AS 58.9-14)

*Stella* oft sees the verie face of wo  
Painted in my beclowded stormie face:  
But cannot skill to pitie my disgrace,  
Not though thereof the cause her selfe she know:  
Yet hearing late a fable, which did show  
Of Lovers never knowne, a grievous case,

<sup>32</sup> Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetorike* (London, [1588]), C8r.

Pitie thereof gate in her breast such place  
 That, from that sea deriv'd, teares' spring did flow.  
 Alas, if Fancy drawne by imag'd things,  
 Though false, yet with free scope more grace doth breed  
 Then servant's wracke, where new doubts honor brings;  
 Then thinke my deare, that you in me do reed  
 Of Lover's ruine some sad Tragedie:  
 I am not I, pitie the tale of me.

Astrophil is lost in that very Sidneian space between being metaphorically written and read and being a text in actuality. The potential of metaphors to tell us about actualities (for love to tell us about reading, or for reading to tell us about love) is both offered and undermined in *Astrophil and Stella* by the sequence's exhilarating games between the poles of the literal and figurative. Astrophil writes, reads, and is written, both literally and figuratively: he is poet, reader, and text; but he is also at times *like* a poet, like a reader, like a text. Stella, similarly, sings, reads, and is read, and is also *like* a figure who sings, or reads, or is read. In sonnet 45, it is her competence as a reader of fictions that appears to Astrophil to render her deaf to the fact of his love; loving and reading are disjoined.

\* \* \*

If *Astrophil and Stella* is concerned with representing hermeneutic and amorous failure (in terms of each other), the *Arcadia* dares to imagine successful love and successful reading and successful love *as* successful reading. But this does not mean that Sidney will not test and question his models along the way. Argalus and Parthenia are the revised *Arcadia's* most idealized lovers.<sup>33</sup> In Sidney's most focused depiction of the two lovers, we are again made to think about reading. Basilius has sent for Argalus to come and fight his rogue nephew Amphialus, who is holding the princesses and Pyrocles (still disguised as an Amazon, named in the revised version not Cleophila but Zelmane) hostage in his castle:

The messenger made speede, and found *Argalus* at a castle of his owne, sitting in a parler with the faire *Parthenia*, he reading in a booke the stories of *Hercules*, she by him, as to heare him reade; but while his eyes looked on the booke, she

<sup>33</sup> We might note in passing that Parthenia comes from Mantinea, like Socrates's Diotima (*Symposium*, 201d–212c), and so, associatively, might have some things to teach us about Platonic love.

looked on his eies, and sometimes staying him with some prety question, not so much to be resolved of the doubt; as to give him occasion to looke upon her. A happy couple, he joying in her, she joying in her selfe, but in her selfe, because she enjoyed him: both encreasing their riches by giving to each other; each making one life double, because they made a double life one, where desire never wanted satisfaction, nor satisfaction never bred sacietie; he ruling, because she would obey: or rather because she would obey, she therein ruling. (90, 2P2v–3r [punctuation silently adjusted in one place]; NA, 371–72)

But the reading sours when Argalus is handed the letter from Basilius summoning him to challenge Amphialus in single combat, and Parthenia must now watch him read it and interpret its meaning in his face:

And wel she found there was some serious matter; for her husbands countenance figured some resolution betweene lothnesse and necessitie: and once his eie cast upon her, and finding hers upon him, he blushed; and she blushed, because he blushed; and yet streight grew paler, because she knew not why he had blushed. (90, 2P3r; NA, 372)

Argalus goes to fight Amphialus and is killed. Parthenia follows him, disguising herself as the Knight of the Tomb and meeting the same fate at the same hand. The reflective images of perfect mutual love in that earlier passage are picked up in their epitaph (a text Sidney may not have written):<sup>34</sup>

The Epitaph.

*His being was in her alone:  
And he not being, she was none.*

*They joi'd one joy, one griefe they griev'd,  
One love they lov'd, one life they liv'd.  
The hand was one, one was the sword  
That did his death, hir death afford.*

*As all the rest, so now the stone  
That tombes the two, is justly one.*

ARGALUS AND PARTHENIA.

(93, 2C1r; NA, 399–400; OP 3)

One thing that these passages suggest is that Sidney is here quietly challenging his own theories. Argalus throws away his life in a pointless duel, and he is perhaps encouraged to this *praxis* by his reading of the

<sup>34</sup> See my *Writing After Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney, 1586–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26–27.

tales of Hercules.<sup>35</sup> But what I want to draw out of this episode in particular is the tension between the symmetry of the two lovers—"each making one life double, because they made a double life one"; "*One love they lov'd, one life they liv'd*"—and a more hierarchical relation—"he joying in her, she joying in her selfe, but in her selfe, because she enjoyed him"; "he ruling, because she would obey: or rather because she would obey, she therein ruling." The hierarchy is one of dependence: Argalus reads the book, Parthenia reads Argalus.

That hierarchy is fundamental to the Platonic theory of love in its original form. We should remember (in spite of Neoplatonism's tendency to adapt the theory in a heterosexual and Christian direction) that Plato's is in its purest form a theory of homosexual love and that this love is not between two equal lovers but between a lover and a beloved, a senior and a junior partner. The lover falls for the beloved because he sees something in the beloved that stirs a recollection of the idea of beauty. The lover, in contemplating the beloved and beginning to climb the ladder of love, shapes within himself an image of the beloved that is to an extent idealized, improved, closer to the idea than to the actuality.<sup>36</sup> The beloved sees this image and cannot but fall for it, and so the love is returned. Just as Argalus reads the book and Parthenia reads Argalus, so the Platonic lover contemplates the ideas and the beloved contemplates the lover. Ficino elaborates the basic Platonic material usefully: "the lover engraves the figure of the beloved on his own soul. And so the soul of the lover becomes a mirror in which the image of the beloved is reflected. For that reason, when the beloved recognizes himself in the lover, he is forced to love him."<sup>37</sup> We find Spenser picking up the image of the mirror in sonnet 45 of *Amoretti*:

Leaue lady in your glasse of christall clene,  
Your goodly selfe for euermore to vew:  
and in my selfe, my inward selfe I meane,  
most liuely lyke behold your semblant trew.  
Within my hart, though hardly it can shew

<sup>35</sup> On readerly *praxis*, see *DP*, 22, discussed further below, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a–251e. Cf. Edmund Spenser, "An Hymne in Honour of Beautie," 211–38, in *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999); further quotations from Spenser's shorter poems are from the texts of this edition. For the ladder, see *Symposium*, 211c.

<sup>37</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium" on Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1985), 57. Cf. *Phaedrus*, 255d: "[The beloved] does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror" (Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997]).

thing so diuine to vew of earthly eye:  
 the fayre Idea of your celestiaall hew,  
 and euery part remaines immortally[.]

This is a conventional take on a commonplace: Spenser is not about to question the hierarchy of male Neoplatonic lover leading female beloved in a sonnet sequence that is, in part at least, a self-serving account of his own domestic life. As an alternative to this hierarchical model of love, the classical philosophy of friendship offers a more symmetrical and mutual model, as Montaigne recognizes with an explicit comparison of the Platonic model and the “kind of love more equable and more equitable” in his essay “On affectionate relationships.”<sup>38</sup> We perhaps see a hint of this wish for something more symmetrical in Spenser’s take on Platonic love in “An Hymne in Honour of Beautie,” for here there are two mirrors facing each other:

But gentle Loue, that loiall is and trew,  
 Will more illumine your resplendent ray,  
 And adde more brightnesse to your goodly hew,  
 From light of his pure fire, which by like way  
 Kindled of yours, your likenesse doth display,  
 Like as two mirroures by opposd reflexion,  
 Doe both expresse the faces first impression.

(176–82)

Sidney reaches toward a more symmetrical version of Platonic love in his depiction of the lovers in whom his narrative is most interested—Pyrocles and Philoclea. And it is here, too, that his thinking about love and his thinking about reading and writing come together most productively.

It was common to apply the term “idea” to the beloved, especially as idealized and perhaps even created by the poet-lover.<sup>39</sup> Just so, in one of their poetic exchanges, Musidorus is told by Pyrocles that he “may to the saint, your onely *Idea*, . . . your manly affection utter” (OA 13.15–16). That is, in fact, Sidney’s only other use of the word apart from the two consecutive uses in the *Defence*. The beloved as idea is both object of love and subject of verse. This dynamic connection between the ideal-

<sup>38</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1991), 211.

<sup>39</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* witnesses a range of meanings of “idea” in the period, from the orthodox Platonic to much looser but nevertheless Plato-derived senses including image, something in the mind (looking forward to Locke), likeness, plan, perfect example, and ideal.

izing that is love and the idealizing that is artistic creation is figured for Renaissance writers in the myth of Pygmalion, allegorized into a paradigm of the idealizing male imagination. The sculptor creates a representation of an idea of beauty, falls in love with it and, through Venus's intercession in bringing the sculpture to life, has that love reciprocated. The myth equates loving both with idealized artistic creation and with the response to the finished work of art.

It is interesting to note that the first of those associations, which I am suggesting is latent in Sidneian poetics (and practice), is drawn out in William Scott's *The Model of Poesy*, a work of poetics profoundly engaged in the job of explicating Sidney's theory and reconciling it with his practice:

[T]he poet proceeds after this manner. First, in his reasonable consideration whilst he ruminates on the true loveliness of virtue, he seems to frame to himself an image of her, which his own work, as the heathens feign of Pygmalion, he grows enamoured of; from thenceforth he becomes her herald and trumpeter, to blazon her, to summon the world to serve under her colours. Hereto comes it that Sir Philip Sidney saith David showed himself, in his divine spirit of poesy, a passionate lover of that unspeakable everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, cleared only by faith. [. . .] Now as this love and liking cometh always of some likeness, so the perfecter the degree of this liking is, the nearer still it is joined to his object, restlessly labouring and striving forward till it be entirely united and even oned with the thing it affecteth. [. . .] And I would to God this might be the scope and end of the ends of all both poetry and other faculties, to make men in love with, and so possessed of, piety and virtue. Then might our art justly be called a divine instrument.<sup>40</sup>

Scott turns naturally from the loving artist to the loving reader. Pygmalion could also figure the latter, as we shall see, and so often functions as a sign of the interchange and interface between writing and reading, between creation and reception, and the role of love in bringing each into productive contact with the other. Love is frequently represented by Sidney in terms of reading and writing and of the painting and viewing of images. As we started to see in *Astrophil and Stella*, there is some surplus in these metaphors, because the loves described in terms of reading and writing are already read and written and that surplus is the space where our concerns as readers can enter into the equation.

The connection between love and writing is also made in the most

<sup>40</sup> Scott, *The Model of Poesy*, ed. Gavin Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15–16.

mundane ways. Love makes the doting Basilius a poet (*OA*, 97.3–7; *NA*, 125.21–25). Musidorus accuses Pyrocles of reading too much poetry and taking on the rhetoric of “these fantastical mind-infected people that children and musicians call lovers,” to which Pyrocles can only answer: “what if I be not so much the poet . . . as even that very miserable subject of his cunning whereof you speak?” (*OA*, 17; *NA*, 52–53). It is “love, the refiner of invention” (*OA*, 12; *NA*, 80) that enables Pyrocles to play the poet with himself and turn into an Amazon, and, as we have already seen, his attempts to plot a happy resolution are described in the terms of literary and rhetorical theory, of “invention” (e.g. *OA*, 113.32, 206.34) and its synonyms.

Musidorus reaches for a more Platonic theory of love early in the *Arcadia* in order to castigate Pyrocles:

For, indeed, the true love hath that excellent nature in it, that it doth transform the very essence of the lover into the thing loved, uniting and, as it were, incorporating it with a secret and inward working. And herein do these kinds of love imitate the excellent; for, as the love of heaven makes one heavenly, the love of virtue, virtuous, so doth the love of the world make one become worldly. And this effeminate love of a woman doth so womanize a man that, if you yield to it, it will not only make you a famous Amazon, but a launder, a distaff-spinner, or whatsoever other vile occupation their idle heads can imagine and their weak hands perform. (*OA*, 20; *NA*, 71–72)<sup>41</sup>

That the love of virtue can lead to virtue—that one can fall in love with an idea and make one’s life an imitation of it—is, as we have seen, key for Sidney’s literary theory: readers who will “despise the austere admonitions of the philosopher” can be led by the poet “to see the form of goodness (which seen they cannot but love) ere themselves be aware” (*DP*, 24). And that love transforms the lover into the thing loved remains the model to which Sidney’s lovers aspire: “As for my name, it shall be Cleophila, turning Philoclea to myself, as my mind is wholly turned and transformed into her” (*OA*, 18). When Pamela recognizes Musidorus’s love for her, she finds “the lively image of a vehement desire in herself” (*OA*, 106), a sort of artistic copy of the idea of Musidorus’s love. Between friends, too, love can work as poetry does in the *Defence*. Pyrocles, we remember, recounts how Musidorus “taught me by word, and best by example, giving me in him so lively an Image of vertue, as ignorance could not cast such mist over mine eyes, as not to

<sup>41</sup> Scott quotes these words of Musidorus in the passage from which I give extracts above: see Scott, *Model*, 16.9–11.



see, and to love it" (90, 2A5r; NA, 235). The mutual sympathy of the two loving princes means that each can find in the other "a sweet reflection of the same joy, and (as in a clear mirror of sincere goodwill) see a lively picture of his own gladness" (OA, 168). What this model becomes, in the case of Sidney's favorite lovers Pyrocles and Philoclea, is a sort of artistic and hermeneutic exchange between two lovers, where each both writes and reads the other.

Pyrocles falls in love with an idea not a real woman—the idea figured forth in a picture of Philoclea with her parents.<sup>42</sup> When this picture is described in the revised *Arcadia* it is set among various pictures of goddesses and mythical women, "but in none of them all beautie seemed to speake so much" (90, C2r; NA, 15) as in Philoclea's: Philoclea's portrait is a "speaking picture" (DP, 10) of an idea of beauty. The picture is "made by *Philoclea*" (90, C2v; NA, 15), that is, a representation of her but also possibly designed *by* her: she has generated the "*idea* or fore-conceit" (DP, 9), which includes in this case the idea of her own beauty. As yet unloved and unloving, she is her own artist. When Pyrocles (disguised as Cleophila and gendered as female) sees the real woman Philoclea and not just her image, s/he is transfixed, transformed into "a well wrought image, with show of life, but without all exercise of life, so forcibly had love transferred all her spirits into the present contemplation of the lovely Philoclea" (OA, 38; cf. NA, 84). When, in book 2, Cleophila/Pyrocles finally gets a chance to tell Philoclea who s/he is, what s/he promises is that "You shall see . . . a living image and a present story of the best pattern love hath ever showed of his workmanship" (OA, 120; cf. NA, 231). At this point Pyrocles is the lover written by love, but because that love is wrought by Philoclea, it is she who is next represented as the artist, as the female Cleophila metamorphoses before her eyes into the male Pyrocles (Sidney puns beautifully on "wax"): "The joy which wrought into Pygmalion's mind while he found his beloved image wax little and little both softer and warmer in his folded arms, till at length it accomplished his gladness with a perfect woman's shape, still beautified with the former perfections, was even such as, by each degree of Cleophila's words, stealingly entered into Philoclea's soul" (OA, 120; NA, 231).<sup>43</sup> Sidney aligns Philoclea's mind with that of the archetypal (male) loving artist, Pygmalion.

<sup>42</sup> The picture is described in OA, 11.25–31 and differently in NA, 15.10–20.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.284–85 for the moment the ivory of the statue starts to become warm and soft like wax.

The association of the love of Pyrocles and Philoclea with idealizing interpretation and a mutually idealizing artistry is reinforced in the revised *Arcadia* and in one scene in particular. The narrator turns to Philoclea:

And alas (sweete *Philoclea*) how hath my penne till now forgot thy passions, since to thy memorie principally all this long matter is intended? [. . .] The sweete minded *Philoclea* was in their degree of well doing, to whom the not knowing of evill serveth for a ground of vertue, and hold their inward powers in better forme with an unspotted simplicitie, then many, who rather cunningly seeke to know what goodnes is, then willingly take into themselves the following of it. (90, Q3r; *NA*, 143)<sup>44</sup>

We notice the specific vocabulary of Sidney's literary theory again. The "ground" of "well doing," according to the *Defence*, ought to be the moral knowledge and the motive force that poetry can provide. All arts and sciences, Sidney tells us, are directed to "the mistress-knowledge, by the Greeks called *architektonikē*, which stands as I think in the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well-doing and not of well-knowing only" (*DP*, 13). But in moving us to do as it teaches, Sidney goes on, poetry has the advantage: "For, as Aristotle saith, it is not *gnōsis* but *praxis* must be the fruit; and how *praxis* can be, without being moved to practise, it is no hard matter to consider" (*DP*, 22). Because Philoclea is untutored, she is less able to understand her feelings toward the Amazon *Zelmana*, and it is the development of those feelings that Sidney goes on to describe as a sort of act of reading, interpretation, and imitative *praxis*:

For after that *Zelmana* had a while lived in the lodge with her, and that her onely being a noble straunger had bred a kind of heedfull attention; her comming to that lonely place . . . a willingnes of conversation; her wit and behaviour, a liking and silent admiration; at length the excellency of her natural gifts, joined with the extreme shewes she made of most devout honouring *Philoclea* . . . brought forth in her hart a yeelding to a most friendly affection; which when it had gotten so full possession of the keies of her mind, that it would receave no message from her senses, without that affection were the interpreter; then streight grew an exceeding delight still to be with her, with an unmeasurable liking of all that *Zelmana* did: matters being so turned in her, that where at first, liking her manners did breed good-wil, now good-wil became the chiefe cause of liking her manners: so that within a while *Zelmana* was not prized for her demeanure, but the demeanure was prized because it was *Zelmanaes*. (90, Q3v; *NA*, 144)

<sup>44</sup> For this passage, see also *OA*, 108.20–28; all the rest is new to the revised *Arcadia*.

We are here at the first stage of the affective triad (delight, teach, move), as Sidney configures it in the *Defence*. Philoclea is delighted and so is predisposed to learn and be moved to *praxis*. What follows is loud with the language of Sidney's literary theory. I excerpt from a long passage:

Then followed that most natural effect of conforming ones self to that, which she did like, and not onely wishing to be her selfe such an other in all things, but to ground an imitation upon so much an esteemed authoritie: so that the next degree was to marke all *Zelmanes* dooings, speeches, and fashions, and to take them into herselfe, as a patterne of worthy proceeding . . . Then grew on that not onely she did imitate the sobernes of her countenance, the gracefulness of her speech, but even their particular gestures: so that as *Zelmane* did often eye her, she would often eye *Zelmane*; and as *Zelmanes* eyes would deliver a submissive, but vehement desire in their looke, she, though as yet she had not the desire in her, yet should her eyes answere in like pearcing kindnesse of a looke . . . til at the last (poore soule, ere she were aware) she accepted not onely the band [93: "badge"], but the service; not only the signe, but the passion signified . . . Then needed she no more paint her face with passions; for passions shone thorow her face[.] (90, Q3v–5r; *NA*, 144–46)

Pyrocles's love for Philoclea creates Philoclea's love as a mirror image of it through a process of imitation that is close to the theory both of writerly *imitatio* and of Sidney's readerly *praxis*. Philoclea wishes to be like what she loves, and in the end this involves a surrender to it—she can choose to be written by *Zelmane*.<sup>45</sup>

There is nowhere else in Sidney such a careful depiction of how reading works, and yet this extraordinary passage is on the face of it a description of falling in love. The use of the language of Sidneian poetics to describe love in the *Arcadia* encourages us, I think, to view the connection from the other side too, to think about what Sidney's depictions of love can tell us about his poetics and his hermeneutics. Artistic creation involves perceiving and refining an idea; so does love. The poet figures the idea forth in his fiction; the lover does the same in the image

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the very end of Sir William Alexander's bridging passage, printed c. 1617 to link the unfinished "new" *Arcadia* to the ending supplied from the last three books of the "old." Alexander, himself a loving imitative reader of Sidney, seems to recognize the potential of Sidney's vocabulary of amorous and readerly *mimesis* to figure his role as Sidney's reader at the very moment that his reading of Sidney comes to an end: "*Philoclea*, chained by thoughts to *Zelmane*, did imitate her being pensive, because shee was pensive: yet like a cunning Painter, who, having fully fed his eyes with the affected object, turnes backe within himselfe, that his imagination may engrave it the more exactly within his memory, she would sometimes with a theevishly adventrous looke spie *Zelmanes* gesture, that she might the better counterfeit it in her countenance" (Alexander's untitled "Supplement" [STC 22544a.3 (1617?)], \*6r; u/v regularized).

of the beloved in his or her heart. The reader is presented with the idea in human form and is, Sidney hopes, captivated by it, delighted, taught, and moved to model him- or herself on it. That reader may just try to be like the image of virtue represented by the poet; or, if the reader can “learn aright why and how that maker made him” (*DP*, 9), then the reader may be apprehending and imitating the idea itself. Similarly, the beloved sees in the lover something that he or she falls in love with, without necessarily knowing exactly what it is: without knowing that it is the image of the beloved, refined and elevated in the lover’s heart through contemplating the idea of beauty that the lover has been led to. The lover idealizes the beloved, and the beloved responds to that idealization with love. We might imagine a more symmetrical version of this model, whereby two lovers each both read and write each other, idealizing the other and responding to the other’s idealization in a sort of positive feedback loop. That is what Sidney moves toward in the revised *Arcadia*, where Pyrocles and Philoclea alternate between lover and beloved, writer and reader. We might remember that when Zelmane is finally revealed as Pyrocles, it is Philoclea who is presented as Pygmalion, the artist whose representation of an idea came to life. And so we might also imagine a more symmetrical version of Sidney’s account of literary interpretation. As a reader I respond to something—call it the text, or the author—that offers me a better version of myself. But I also have to do some of the work, and the job of learning “aright why and how” the author wrote as he or she wrote involves me in an idealizing of motive and intention—I read generously, lovingly, in order that the text might offer me more in return.

It may sound far-fetched to talk of the relation between text and reader as like the relation between two lovers, but I think that is only because I am talking in metaphors: Sidney’s metaphors. What those metaphors lead us toward is a richly dynamic model of reading, a model that imagines the communion between text and reader as an intimate, loving engagement, with each idealizing the other, making demands, having designs, and moving from surface appearance to something more significant beneath. This model of reading has a clearly Platonic shape, but it is Sidney’s model, not Plato’s, and it is a model worked out in the space of metaphorical exchange between one set of ideas (about love) and another (about reading). We cannot finally answer the question of how committed was Sidney to Platonism in general and Platonic love in particular. Plato, and the Neoplatonic tradition, certainly fired and molded Sidney’s thinking, but Sidney is a poet-theorist in a

deep sense: he synthesizes, imitates, takes and remakes ideas, he finds and creates resemblances, his practice is his theory and his theory is his practice. What we can say is that Sidney's hermeneutics was explored and imaginatively articulated in Platonic terms. For Sidney, the poet engages the reader in something like a dialogue;<sup>46</sup> and the dialogic give and take of interpretation is like love. We may just be objects of a text's affections, even spurning and failing to requite its love. Or we may misread it by getting stuck on the textual surface. We may fall for it and in doing so find ourselves changing. But we may also love, or interpret, it more actively and see it respond and evolve in turn, as between us, text and reader, we climb a ladder of interpretation toward an elusive idea.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. my *Writing After Sidney*, chap. 1, esp. 2–5 and 29–30.

<sup>47</sup> Versions of this article were presented as papers at a meeting of the British and Irish Spenser Seminar in Oxford, at the Renaissance Graduate Seminar in the Faculty of English at Cambridge, and at a conference on romance at the University of Dundee to celebrate the life and work of Victor Skretkowicz. I am grateful to those present on each occasion for questions that clarified my thinking and for suggestions that extended my frame of reference, especially to Katrin Ettenhuber, Julian Lethbridge, and Noel Sugimura. I should like to thank Jane Wright for a generous and acute reading of a later draft, which did much to improve the final version, and for the helpful comments of *SP*'s readers and editor. This article is dedicated to the memory of Victor Skretkowicz.